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Recommended Citation

Starr, Juliana. "Something in the Way She Moves: Bodily Motion as Innovation in Bernhardt's Hamlet." *American International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 6, no. 1, Sept. 2020, pp. 24-33.

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Something in the Way She Moves: Bodily Motion as Innovation in Bernhardt's Hamlet

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Abstract

Sarah Bernhardt's audiences often described feeling thrilled by the star performer, and they relished the ways in which her agency exceeded their own. She developed a style of setting her entire body in motion, often in arresting, unusual ways. Using Sharon Marcus's concept of "exteriority effects"—mobility, framing, tempo control, and hyperextension—this article analyzes Bernhardt's stage movement in her most famous cross-gender role, Hamlet. It seeks to prove that the most revolutionary aspect of her performance was, ironically, not its cross gender aspect, but rather its virtuosic physical interpretation of the Prince as a determined man of action, which profoundly challenged the prevailing Romantic interpretations.

Keywords: Sarah Bernhardt, Hamlet, stage movement, cross gender performance, physical gestures, innovation in acting, magnetism

INTRODUCTION

Sarah Bernhardt (born Sarah-Marie-Henriette Bernard 1844-1923), once dubbed the eighth wonder of the world, was the most famous actress of the late nineteenth century. Celebrated for her golden voice, for an innovative use of costume and jewelry, for her patronage of emerging artists, and for the business acumen that saw her fast become a household name across the globe, she was the progenitor of celebrity as we know it today. Performing in her native French across Europe and North America, and as far afield as South America and Australia, she was feted by audiences for more than fifty years (Duckett, 2019). Sharon Marcus calls her simply “the most important and popular performer of the nineteenth century” (313). Robert Gottlieb states, “Bernhardt’s name remains the paradigm for ‘Great Actress.’ She is still the most famous of all Frenchwomen after Joan of Arc and the most famous French personality of the nineteenth century after Napoleon” (Duckett, 2019).

Bernhardt’s audiences often described feeling fascinated, thrilled, and dominated by the star performer, and they relished the ways in which her agency seemed to exceed their own. She inspired overpowering bodily sensations such as chills and fevers even in professional drama critics. Performing exclusively in French for audiences who, even when equipped with bilingual playbooks, often did not fully understand the words she uttered, she relied strongly on physical gestures and vocal inflection. She thus developed a style that showcased her powers of setting her entire body in motion, often in arresting, unusual, or virtuosic ways unavailable to other performers (Marcus, 2017). Recently, Sharon Marcus has identified four of Bernhardt’s “exteriority effects” or performance techniques that help explain the extremes of agency at work between the electric, charismatic, controlled actor and her mesmerized and enthralled audiences. I will use Marcus’s concept of Bernhardt’s four “exteriority effects”—mobility, framing, tempo control, and hyperextension—to analyze Bernhardt’s bodily motion in her most famous cross-gender role, Hamlet.

In so doing, I hope to prove that the most revolutionary aspect of her performance was, ironically, not that she was a woman playing a man's role, but rather that her intensely physical interpretation of the Prince as a resolute, rational and determined man of action profoundly challenged the prevailing Romantic interpretations of the man as a melancholic, contemplative, hesitant, and vacillating procrastinator (Taranow, 1996).

For many, Bernhardt most enduring appeal lay in her ability to thrill audiences while also challenging the gender norms of her day. When asked why she liked men's roles, she replied that most women's parts were mere play, a matter of looking pretty and portraying emotions (Omara-Otunnu, 2019). Male roles punctuated her career, marking important landmarks, and bore witness to her daring. Her first "trouser" role was her first fledgling success as a young actress.

The year was 1867, she was in her early twenties, and the role was that of a ten-year-old boy named Zacharie in Racine's *Athalie*. She was rewarded with three bursts of applause. Two years later, the first all-out triumph of her nascent career also transpired in pants. In *The Passerby*, Bernhardt played Zanetto, a Renaissance boy troubadour who spends one night with an aging courtesan. The performance made her the most talked about actor in Paris virtually overnight. By 1896, she had her own theater and again played a man in the title role in Musset's *Lorenzaccio*, a drama so unwieldy that it had never been staged. Her most controversial act of cross-gender performance came in 1899, as Hamlet, and proved a triumph. A year later, she played one of the defining male roles of her career in *The Eaglet*, the tragic saga of Napoleon's exiled, dying, twenty-year-old son, the Duc de Reichstadt. In 1916, on a tour of the U.S., she undertook the trial scene of *The Merchant of Venice*, alternating as both Portia and Shylock. She did so literally on one leg, having endured the amputation of her chronically injured right leg. She was seventy-two.

Bernhardt was fifty-four years old when she performed *Hamlet* in her recently- acquired theater on the Place du Châtelet, a theater that bore her name (Singer, 2019). Surprisingly, there had been upwards of fifty female Hamlets in the 1800s before she performed the role, first in Paris then in London, in 1899. That year, the *Daily Telegraph* noted: "It is hard to remember a time when the female Hamlet has not been with us" (June 16). The role was played by American, Australian, Irish, Italian, and as English actresses, in Britain and throughout the world. Both role and actress benefitted from this female casting. Bernhardt was thus not alone in achieving, through her Hamlet, a critical seriousness and recognition of her gravity as a performer. The lure of the male role was considerable, especially if it was Shakespeare (Marshall, 2019).

Probably everyone in that Parisian audience in 1899 had in some ways encountered the Hamlet myth, for it pervaded French culture in the nineteenth century. A continuation and intensification of Romanticism, "Hamletism," a term coined by the symbolist poet Jules Laforgue in 1886, was the result of three generations of Romantics: those centering on the years 1830, 1850, and 1890. The generation that attended the "soirées anglaises" (English soirees) in 1827 and 1828 quickly became known as "the Shakespeareans." Their enthusiasm for *Hamlet* was unbridled and was shaped not only by the play itself, but also by the *Hamlet* series of lithographs of Delacroix, and later poetic renderings by Baudelaire, Mallarmé and LaForgue. But Hamlet also experienced a different type of existence during the Romantic era. The black-clad Prince—always young, always meditative, always melancholy—became a symbol of the spiritually embattled hero: sensitive, creative, philosophic, irresolute, pessimistic, and doomed (Taranow, 1996). Hamlet was seen as a character endowed with feelings so delicate as to border on weakness, with sensibility too exquisite to allow of determined action (Boatner-Doane, 2017).

Bernhardt's vision of *Hamlet* stood in direct contrast with the Romantic ideal. She understood the work as an Elizabethan revenge play, insisting that Hamlet was not a thought-sick irresolute protagonist, but rather an avenger intent on his purpose. Hence, she had a vision of the role as an intensely physical one. She approached the work with an extensive background in two traditions—classicism and the Boulevard—and undoubtedly recognized that although Shakespeare's dramaturgy had points in contact with both, it had greater affinities with the popular tradition of the Boulevard, with its emphasis on plot and strong central conflicts, its preference for action acted rather than action reported, its extended death scenes, its use of prose rather than poetry, and its opulent scenery (Taranow, 1996) At the turn of the century she was experiencing repertorial difficulties, for few good playwrights were writing the type of plays that suited her histrionic art. Having been reared in the French tradition of *travesti*, or women playing boys or men minor roles, she turned to this conventional source and expanded its possibilities.

Beginning with Lorenzaccio, she took principal or *premier* roles written for actors and transformed them into *travestis*. Lorenzaccio was the first and Hamlet was the second and most prestigious of all such roles she was to perform, roles that represented a new acting category that she initiated: the *premier travesti rôle* (Taranow, 1996).

In 1910 a Chicago drama critic named Sheppard Butler published a remarkably observant review of Bernhardt's performance in *La Tosca*, a play still known today through Puccini's 1900 opera adaptation. Butler's anatomy of a scene allowed Marcus to identify three of Bernhardt's "exteriority effects" or physical performance techniques, elements that help us understand just how the actress used her body to impact her audiences so strongly: mobility, framing, and tempo control. As for mobility, Butler's liberal use of verbs highlights Bernhardt's almost incessant motion. Over the course of only a few minutes, she *scrubs, dabs, plucks, blows, takes, stoops, places, creeps, listens, steps, closes*, and more (Marcus, 2017).

MOBILITY

In *Hamlet*, her use of constant movement revolutionized the role. In her initial encounter with the Ghost, Bernhardt began to develop the themes of vendetta and affection by adapting and transforming stage movement from traditional English theater practice. The accounts reveal that following Horatio's line, "Regardez, monseigneur, la chose vient," ("Look, sir, the thing is coming"), Hamlet, catching sight of the Ghost, hastily removed his hat and dashed it "to the floor" (Norris, 1889). Previous Hamlets either let the hat fall involuntarily to the ground, deliberately removed the hat, or spontaneously or unconsciously uncovered their head. Whatever the exact gesture, it was one of love and reverence. What distinguished Bernhardt's gesture sharply from the others' was the dashing of the hat to the ground, which arguably revealed not simply reverence and affection, but determination as well (Taranow, 1996). In fact, in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, she defended her response to the Ghost in terms of her conception of Hamlet as a determined young avenger. "People blame me for not being sufficiently surprised, for not being sufficiently frightened when I see the Ghost. He is waiting for him and he says as much... When the Ghost wants to entice him away he draws his sword against his friends and threatens to kill them if they are unwilling to let him go. This is not the action of a weak man" (1899, May 22).

Bernhardt's interpretation of an unafraid and resolute Hamlet bent on vengeance differed drastically with that of Sarah Siddons, one of the most famous female Hamlets of the early Romantic era of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, an era fascinated with the character's interiority and inner turmoil. The critical responses to Siddons' Hamlet reveals that her contemporaries saw the actress' femininity and acting methods as particularly effective for conveying the sensibility and irresolution that became increasingly associated with Hamlet in literary criticism of the period. In particular, the responses to Siddons' performances emphasize Hamlet's first encounter with his father's Ghost, a scene often considered the focal point of definitive performances by other actors of the time like Thomas Betterton, David Garrick, and Siddons' brother John Philip Kemble. The fact that these commentators describe Siddons' Hamlet as superior to her brother's and praise her reactions in the Ghost scene suggests that she succeeded in creating a dramatic interpretation of the character that aligned with the Romantic focus on Hamlet's inner life (Boatner-Doane, 2017).

Reviews of Bernhardt's *Hamlet* consistently praised her for rejecting the Romantic tradition of madness, and this conception was again reflected in her movement. She saw Hamlet as possessing an antic disposition of feigned madness, in contrast to Ophelia's madness, which was real. For her, feigned madness was a strategy that enabled Hamlet to better disarm his adversaries and achieve his end goal of revenge. One of Hamlet's comic interpolations, directed at Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, was regarded by most critics as innovative. At his first meeting with his former school friends, Hamlet gave vent to his antic disposition by jocosely knocking their heads together several times. Another touch of levity occurred in the play scene when, after he coached the actors, he jumped lightly from the platform with a burst of laughter (Taranow, 1996).

Mobility leads to stillness, and for some, Bernhardt was equally effective in both modalities. Elizabeth Robins admired the French performer's mastery of what she called, "sheer poise," defining it as "the power she has of standing stock still for an indefinite length of time, never shifting her ground, and... never ceasing for a moment to be dramatic" (Robins, 1900). The American actress believed it was when Bernhardt stood absolutely still "with her feet firmly planted, making only occasional use of sparing, clean-cut gesture" that she came closest to the realization of her own artistry (Robins, 1900). E.A. Dithmar was equally impressed by her stillness, pointing out that it contrasted admirably with her movement.

“So wonderfully graceful in every motion and gesture” was Bernhardt’s Hamlet, “so agile and restless most of the time, but so incomparably effective in repose” that Dithmar predicted it would please “the few, the art-loving, the appreciative, if not the multitude” (Dithmar, 1900). John Hansen did not concern himself with movement and repose, but he was convinced that Bernhardt created an “acting part” rather than a “speaking part” and that as a consequence, one tends to remember more of what Hamlet “does” than what he “says” (Hansen, 1899).

FRAMING

Marcus illustrates a second exteriority effect called framing. She describes a Bernhardt who frequently isolates a particular body part or facial feature. In *La Tosca* we see her “restless, roving eyes” and the fingers that she slowly scrubs one by one, inviting spectators to train their gaze on each digit as she sets it into isolated motion by removing the blood (Marcus, 2017). In *Hamlet*, the body parts that she isolated the most frequently and the most deftly were her hands.

She was known for the unusual skill and grace of her hand movements, movements which were exhibited in many plays, but which constituted the essence of her interpretation of the famous death scene of *La Dame aux camélias* (Taranow, 1996). In the platform scene of *Hamlet*, critics like Elizabeth Robins and Zoë Anderson Norris applauded the moving expression of emotion in the prince’s speech to his father’s ghost while emphasizing the importance of Bernhardt’s hands. She stood with her arms outstretched “imploringly” toward her father, investing the word *père* (father) with so much filial affection that they were profoundly moved (Robins, 1900). Norris mentions that as Hamlet calls to his father, the audience’s attention was focused upon the “epitome of grief” expressed by “those frail little hands trembling against the darkness” (Norris, 1899). Having attended a London performance and who took her place among the standees arriving at the theater with their well-worn copies of the text, Norris asserted that she “would even stand for four hours, crushed by the crowd, to see the trembling of those delicate hands” (Norris, 1899).

Another innovation in the platform scene that attracted considerable attention again focused on Hamlet’s hands – his crossing himself before he followed the Ghost. So unusual at the time was this piece of stage business that, prior to the opening of *Hamlet* in New York, it was specifically cited in the *New York Herald* as one of the “exquisite points never before imagined in the role” (1900). The tradition in the English theater that preceded Bernhardt involved the use of a sword that had been used in the preceding struggle between Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus, and which was either pointed at the Ghost or pointed behind Hamlet (Taranow, 1996). Bernhardt’s choice to give the sign of the cross instead of handling a sword turned the focus on her own hands rather than on a prop, while adding a spiritual dimension to the scene.

In the closet scene of *Hamlet* she would again employ her expressive hands with an effect thematically linked to the grief and filial affection of the platform scene (Taranow, 1996). Elizabeth Robins recorded the fullest description of these moments:

In the closet scene, the French performance shows the full-length portraits of the two kings [Claudius and the elder Hamlet]. The one of Hamlet’s father is painted on gauze, and the apparition is made to appear within the frame by a sudden flood of strong light revealing, behind the painted gauze, the brilliantly illuminated figure of the actor who does the Ghost. After flying to see if she could intercept the apparition as it stole away “out of the portal,” Madame Bernhardt got a curious and touching effect by running back to the now dull and un-illuminated picture, appealing dumbly for another sign, and passing pathetic fluttering hands over the unresponsive surface, groping piteously like a child in the dark (Robins, 1900).

Norris also draws attention to the “little white hands trembling again” as she had done previously in the platform scene (Norris, 1889). Prior to the opening of the production in New York, the critic of the *New York Herald* reported that “enthusiasts” who had seen Bernhardt’s performance praised her Hamlet for exquisite details, such as “having him touch his father’s portrait when the ghost has vanished” (1900).

Bernhardt again used drew focus to her hands in an interesting bit of comic relief in the second act when Polonius announced to Hamlet the arrival of the players. When Polonius shared his news with Hamlet, “The actors have arrived, sir,” the Prince responded with the Elizabethan expression “buz, buz,” translated as “Bzzz! Bzzz!.” Hamlet then continued the onomatopoeic sound through Polonius’ next speech while accompanying the buzzing with the movement of following the progress of an invisible fly which he ultimately caught either in front of, or directly on, Polonius’ nose.

The Prince then opened his palm slowly under the Chamberlain's nose to reveal his catch. The comic business of catching a fly in his bare hand met with mixed responses, but almost all critics agreed that it was innovative (Taranow, 1996). And again it demonstrates how Bernhardt made interesting physical choices while integrating elements of comic relief.

The articulate hands are central to the nunnery scene, interpreted by the actress as an encounter of tender rebuke. A drawing of the scene by the artist H.P. Howe, documenting a performance at the Adelphi Theater in London, presents a Hamlet whose gestural language is graceful, with the fingers elegantly spaced and rounded. All the fingers of both hands are in the midst of movement. So impressed was Clement Scott with Bernhardt's interpretation of the entire scene that he maintained she not only rivaled, but surpassed Henry Irving's similar rendering (Taranow, 1996). Finally, her hands are again showcased in the iconic graveyard scene. "Hélas! pauvre Yorik!" says Hamlet to Horatio, holding the skull. Robins remarked that, "with those eloquent hands of hers," she retained the skull in her hand much longer than other performers, and "tapped the grinning teeth" with her finger (Robins, 1900).

In addition, she eliminated the handkerchief that most Romantic Hamlets used to wipe their hands after contact with the skull. The fact that she held the skull for an unusually long time and did not wipe her hands after contact with it, suggests that she was more relaxed in the presence of it than other interpreters of Hamlet, and that she faced her mortality more directly. What is revealing as well is that Bernhardt was sufficiently impressed with her own interpretation of the scene to choose its performance for a photograph so widely used for publicity that it soon became emblematic of her production (Taranow, 1996). It provides a salient example of her technique of framing. By training her eyes on the skull in her hand, she invites the spectators to do the same.



Sarah Bernhardt in publicity still for *Hamlet*, 1899.

Another body part that she skillfully called into focus was hair. For this, Bernhardt rejected a longstanding convention in the English theater, notably Hamlet's use of Ophelia's fan as a screen through which to scrutinize Claudius during the play scene. From the first documented use of the fan in 1735 by Robert Wilks, through its subsequent employment by David Garrick, John Philip Kemble, and Charles Kemble, the fan always had some connection with Hamlet's observation of the King. Bernhardt's Hamlet rejected the fan, and concentrated on scrutinizing him through other means. He took the usual position at Ophelia's feet but then elevated himself so that he could recline on Ophelia's lap. Adapting the concept of the fan, he "endearingly" touched Ophelia's head, "tenderly fondling the long golden tresses" which he used as a "sort of veil" or "screen" through which he watched "the effect of the play on the king's countenance" (Stanton, 1899). It was clear that Bernhardt employed Ophelia's hair as a means of facilitating Hamlet's observation of the King (Taranow, 1996).

In the final scene, hair again played an important role when the Queen's dead body draped across the elevated tribune, her long tresses made to stream "over the edge" so that they might subsequently be used for an unusual effect by the dying Hamlet.

As he showed the signs up impending death, he reached up and “reverently kissed his dead mother’s flowing tresses” (Hansen, 1899). The London press was deeply moved by this final display of affection (Taranow, 1996). These pieces of brand new stage business testify to Bernhardt’s enormous creativity. They also show how she masculinized Hamlet by eliminating two feminine props that had been used for many decades, the handkerchief and the fan. Finally, they also show a pattern of removing props (the sword in the platform scene, the handkerchief in the graveyard scene, the fan in the play scene) in favor of using her own body to directly convey drama and emotion.

TEMPO CONTROL

The third exteriority effect that Marcus describes is tempo control. Bernhardt was praised as a “master of pace” adept at varying the speed of her movement (Marcus, 2017). As Tosca, Bernhardt exercised tempo control when she protracted the action of scrubbing the bloodstains on her gloves finger by finger, when she carefully dabbed and plucked at her skirt, and when she stooped “slowly” to place candles by Scarpia’s corpse. The deceleration and acceleration involved modeled the speeding up and slowing down associated with emotions like joy, interest, fear, and anger (Marcus, 2017). In *Hamlet* too, she was adroit in conveying emotion through varying the tempo of stage movement.

In the nunnery scene, for example, the Prince’s anger—both genuine and simulated—was conveyed through vocal means, but was well supported by a “hardness” and “nervous force” in the “fits and starts” of his behavior (Daily Telegraph, 1899). Another example occurred during the prayer scene, when the Prince moved to kill the King, reconsidered, and slowly withdrew. Of great significance here was Hamlet’s proximity to the King, one denounced by critics but fervently defended by Bernhardt as part of the thematic vendetta underlying the entire production. Hamlet, she asserted, must be near the King in order to attempt to kill him, to hear him pray, and as a consequence, to realize that if he exacts his vengeance at this time, he will reward rather than punish his adversary (Taranow, 1996). The critic of the *Morning Post* regarded the entire scene as “far more strongly rendered than usual” because Hamlet stood beside the King “ready to strike,” then “gradually withdrew” (1899). It was precisely the subtlety of the withdrawal that impressed another critic, for he points out that Hamlet “draws back from the wicked uncle...with a gesture more than usually restrained” (Two Spectacles, 1899).

Tempo control and mobility lead to alternation between pausing and palpitating, stillness and gliding. In *Hamlet*, another example of tempo control occurred during the fencing scene. After striking the sword from Laertes’ hand, Bernhardt introduced a pause—long, intense, and hostile—that became one of her most widely admired innovations in the scene. Hamlet’s pause was reinforced by his glance, which was riveted with determination upon his opponent (Taranow, 1996). One critic called it a “deadly pause”; another, a “pause of discovery and defiance”; still another, a “silence big with concentrated meaning” (Morning Post, 1899, The Star, Truth, 1899). Another contended that the pause transformed the Prince from a plaything of destiny into an avenger in control of his fate (Régis, 1899). In my opinion, this was precisely the effect that Bernhardt was seeking.

In 1900, she transferred her dynamic techniques to film. For her debut in the new medium she chose Hamlet’s fencing scene and death, and she adapted the film segment directly from the staged fencing scene. This one-minute short was at once a vaudeville skit, a reference and excerpt of another play, and evidence of the modern woman who used sport to maintain an athletic and svelte figure. A calculated response to the new art form, it was emblematic of the transition from theater to film that marked the transition between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Duckett, 2017). In this role, Bernhardt was the first woman to appear in cross dress on film, the first woman to die on film, the first woman to commission her own role on film, and the first woman to perform sport on film (Duckett, 2019).



Sarah Bernhardt in film still from *Hamlet*, 1900.

Other than the fencing scene, the performance of *Hamlet* contained significant pauses at crucial times. In the first act when Horatio shares with the Prince the news of his encounter with the Ghost, Hamlet, preoccupied with his thoughts, interspersed his questions with pauses. Like the long pause in the fencing scene, the series of pauses here was reinforced with facial acting that revealed the Prince's thoughtfulness (Taranow, 1996). In the nunnery scene, a pause was also introduced, the effect of which was not preoccupation, but suspicion. The line, "Where's your father?" the translators suggest, should be preceded by a long pause, and the London *Daily Chronicle* indicates that the translators' intentions were indeed carried out in performance. What is revealed about the pauses in all three scenes is that they were of sufficient dynamism to generate critical interest. The pauses treat widely disparate emotions: meditative preoccupation, controlled defiance, and apprehensive suspicion. The pause in *Hamlet* therefore served as an intensifier in a variety of situations. Bernhardt's integration of substantial pauses was innovative, not only in the context of *Hamlet*, but in that of French theater practice as well (Taranow, 1996).

HYPEREXTENSION

Bernhardt deployed a fourth exteriority effect throughout her career: hyperextension, the ability to flex a body part beyond its normal range of motion (Marcus, 2017). Here, the actress was endowed with a body type that was particularly well suited to mastering this technique. Because she was very thin, she shrugged off the corset both on and off stage, with the result that she enjoyed a freedom of movement virtually unshared by women of her generation (Roberts, 2002). Jules Lemaître once claimed that "the sky had given Madame Sarah Bernhardt singular gifts" including "a svelteness and suppleness that are surprising" (Roberts, 2002). In 1901, Gustave Kahn described her as "physically fluid" with an "undulous, evasive waist" and "coiling hips" (Roberts, 2002). She was frequently compared to a serpent, particularly after she played Cleopatra with a live snake on stage in 1890. Visual images of Bernhardt that portray the actress as a strangely disembodied spiral or serpent point to her enormous performative talents, as if her sense of self, like her body, was "miraculously plastic," to use one journalist's phrase (Roberts, 2002).

Especially noteworthy here is her famous fainting collapse playing Marguerite Gautier at the end of Act 3 in *La dame aux camélias*. Bernhardt rotated, inverted, flattened, and arched different parts of her body to perform what became an almost literally pivotal scene. Even as she enacted Marguerite's distress, her use of hyperextension showcased her virtuosic control over her body. The sections, seams, and flourishes of her costume cannily articulated the different segments of her pose as she arched, twisted, and angled her head, trunk, and limbs in different directions, emphasizing her flexibility, extension, and balance. By thrusting her chest upward while pulling her pelvis back, Bernhardt created the deep (and eponymous) "S" curve for which she was so well known. This is, as it were, the signature posture of a star whose chosen first name began with the letter *S* (Marcus, 2017).

Bernhardt was known for her death scenes and she purposefully chose a repertoire that included a great number of them. It is a matter of no small significance that her Hamlet was the first Prince of Denmark to die standing. The manner of his death is one that is derived from techniques that the actress had developed over a period of thirty-one years, spanning both classical and romantic repertoires (Taranow, 1996). From sources, we learn that having exacted his revenge forcefully and expressed his affectionate farewell to his mother, the weakened Hamlet was himself about to die. Horatio and a courtier supported Hamlet, he "died standing" and Horatio caught his "reeling body" (Taranow, 1996).

The “reeling body” points to a type of elaborate pantomime and death spiral scene that Bernhardt had developed with great success for *La dame aux camélias*. In this play, the standing figure of Marguerite was propelled from an upright position at stage left to a horizontal position at stage right through the medium of the guiding and supporting pivot of her lover’s hand. With the use of Horatio as a pivot, the same type of death pantomime involving Bernhardt’s signature spiral movement might have been executed in *Hamlet* (Taranow, 1996).

It is worth noting that near the end of her life, as an amputee, Bernhardt still managed to thrill audiences with bold choices and a similar and unusual type of dramatic death, underscoring her remarkable physicality. Her final cross gender theatrical adventure came in 1920, at the age of seventy-six, portraying a bedridden thirty-year-old male drug addict in *Daniel*, a new play. Director Rouben Mamoulian stated, “Propped with pillows, in bed, she was dying. Any other actor dying in this particular scene would have fallen back into the pillows...Not so with Bernhardt. Unexpectedly, with *a shock that made you sit up and quiver in your chair*, she fell forward like a figure of lead, heavy and limp...There was death – stark, final, unpremeditated” (Singer, 2019, my italics). This quote testifies to the direct corporeal impact of Bernhardt’s performance on her public.

INTEGRATION OF TECHNIQUES

To summarize Bernhardt’s methods of movement, a segment of the play scene from *Hamlet* shows how she integrated all four of them at once—framing (by using Ophelia’s hair as a screen), mobility (in the case, crawling, rolling and climbing), tempo control (varying speeds of movement as she crawls and climbs), and hyperextension (sitting with a twisted back, then standing on tiptoe with an arched back). During the speech of Lucianus that culminates in his pouring poison into the ear of the sleeping Gonzago, Hamlet typically crawled stealthily towards the King while at the same time scrutinizing his every movement. By 1899 the crawl had become a traditional element of both English and French performances. Bernhardt integrated the crawl into her performance after observing the King through Ophelia’s tresses, as we have seen. She first lowered herself, briefly rolled on the floor, then crawled across the stage until she reached the wooden bench at the foot of the King’s tribune (Taranow, 1996).

But she discarded the stage business that usually followed the crawl, that of Hamlet’s rising to his knees at the King’s feet and rapidly delivering his speech to his adversary, in favor of introducing a startling piece of business which was captured by Ricardo Marín in his sketch of the scene (Taranow, 1996). Marín reveals Hamlet seated on the elevated bench at the base of the tribune, his arms stealthily reaching upwards in the direction of the King. In critical evaluations of this segment of the play scene, the verbs used to describe Hamlet’s ascent of the tribune are *creep*, *climb*, *crouch*, *clamber*, and *crawl* (Taranow, 1996). At the approach of the pantomime indicating the poisoning, he stood “tiptoe” and, as the King, “in horror,” leaned “farther and farther forward,” their two heads, “with their eyes gazing at different angles,” almost met (Taranow, 1996). Although descriptions of Hamlet’s movement differ in details and emphasis, all agree that his ascent of the tribune during Lucianus’ speech augmented the terror and precipitated the flight of the guilty king (Taranow, 1996). Again, this scene shows how Bernhardt skillfully integrated different types of bodily motion all at once.

CONCLUSION

While other actresses such as Virginie Déjazet, Ida Rubinstein, Sarah Siddons, and Charlotte Cushman played cross-gender roles successfully, none other did so with such longevity, and such a wide age disparity between the actress and the role. Bernhardt was fifty-four when she played Hamlet and fifty-six when she first played the Duke of Reichstadt, who was even younger than Hamlet in real life, a role that she reprised ten years later. Her choice to play young male roles late in her career was not only a radically anti-agist feminist response to the often limiting professional opportunities afforded aging women, but was also a brilliant strategic move that kept her relevant as an artist into old age (Cobrin, 2012). Indeed, as it turned out, the added component of age disparity, combined with the disability later in her life, only impressed audiences and critics all the more with her enduring artistry.

Bernhardt’s cross-gender performances are still relevant and newsworthy today. Opening in September 2018 and still running on Broadway, Pulitzer finalist Theresa Rebeck’s play *Bernhardt/Hamlet* stars Janet McTeer playing Bernhardt playing Hamlet. The work chronicles the backstage realm at the time the actress decided to tackle *Hamlet* as Hamlet (Singer, 2019).

In addition, several British theaters have recently pledged to address the levels of gender inequality on the contemporary stage, resulting in successful experiments such as Maxine Peake playing Hamlet (in Manchester in 2014), Harriet Walter playing Henry IV (in London in 2014), and Kathryn Hunter playing both King Lear (in Leicester in 1997) and Richard III (at the Globe in 2003). (Croall, 2018). Like Bernhardt these women confirm that a skilled actress might enhance not only her career, but also the understanding of a role, by bringing her own insights and talents to bear on any part. They also suggest that whether for a male or a female actor, the principal roles of Shakespearean tragedy are still the measure of a great performer (Marshall, 2019). These works testify to the enduring thirst, on the part of both actors and audiences, for theatrical art that challenges and explores gender norms.

Clearly, Sarah Bernhardt was as accomplished in the subtleties of movement as in those of voice. But, while her *Hamlet* was received enthusiastically in Paris, London reviewers were less keen. Her emphasis on action, gaiety, and strength of will, was for some mere, “excessive bustle and frivolous energy” (Shudovsky, 1941). Arguably, a century of Romantic criticism had reduced Shakespeare’s Dane to a weak, irresolute being who shuns action while luxuriating in morbid introspection. Few indeed were the important actors of the nineteenth century who dared to depart radically from this passive conception. No wonder then that Bernhardt’s physically dynamic take on the role proved, for some, disappointing. Unlike his fellow critics, however, the reviewer of the *London Times* was mostly favorable, emphasizing her unconventional interpretation: “She is not at all the melancholy philosopher, over-weighted by the burden of thought and reflection. She makes Hamlet a pleasant, humorous, very gay prince, who in happier circumstances might have been the life and soul of the Court. Hamlet, as Madame Bernhardt reads the part, is less the moody Dane than a full-blooded Latin, full of energy” (London Times, 1899). As part of the feminizing tradition, she performed her Hamlet in *travesti*, not, however, as a man with a feminine soul, but rather as a boyish young man with a masculine soul; not as the vacillating procrastinator of Romanticism but as the determined and purposeful avenger of the Elizabethan theater (Taranow, 1996). Her considerable skills, including her mastery of the four performance techniques of mobility, framing, tempo control and hyperextension—developed and perfected over many decades—were ideally suited to challenge a stale tradition. Indeed, her *Hamlet* constituted a towering technical achievement.

Though she was not by any means the first nor the last woman to play Hamlet, Bernhardt was undoubtedly a pioneer who rescued Shakespeare’s prince from the meshes of more than a hundred years of Romantic criticism and interpretation (Shudovsky, 1941). It will be interesting to see how future “dames” will play the “Dane.”

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